

Web-chat Date: January 11, 2011

Topic: Teaching for Understanding VS. Teaching just for Comprehension in EFL Classrooms

Abstract:

One of the issues in designing and assessing EFL instruction is the extent of the language understanding and comprehension teachers expect to see in their student's performance. The intricacy and fine-line of these differences and their expected outcome greatly affects how teachers instruct, respond to, and evaluate the students' language progress and proficiency level. But what exactly is the difference between teaching for understanding as opposed to teaching for comprehension? Which is more important and for what purpose should this be applied to classroom activities? Will students be wrong to show more of their understanding without identifying specific learning comprehension? Or does the students' comprehension lead to their expressed understanding of the materials? What type of activities teachers can engage the students in when they look for students' comprehension? And what kind of questions teachers can ask the students in order to see their understanding? Would students be able to understand without having total comprehension of the language input?

Transcript:

Eve: I find that at first my students can be reluctant, but I do some theater activities to show that they can still find the meaning without understanding all the words and show them how the same idea applies when reading.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): Mark Furr's READING CIRCLES format is very good. You can find on the Net. It gets students talking. This is proven, not just in Japan where Mark is.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): Somporn, not every single word. Extensive reading says comprehend & understand without a dictionary.

DUONG: What is reading circles

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): Duong, look for Mark Furr on Google, he has great ideas that work.

Damon Anderson: William, I believe you had some ideas to help students get beyond comprehension and go to understanding.

Chollada: I told them to forget how difficult of the vocabularies. Thank you Eve I agree with Khun Damon and you.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): It is a circle of six students, each with a specific 'task' in reading a text and preparing it for discussion.

somporn nuddhapon: Yeah,Bill I understand it right now...extensive reading is quite clear in terms of overall comprehension,is it right ??

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): yes somporn

Phanisara: The idea of reading circles is often credited to Paulo Freire. Freire developed "culture circles," or problem-solving study groups to guide discussion and learning experiences.

somporn nuddhapon: Even the teachers,we sometimes do need to use our own techniques to guess the meaning from what we are reading as we seem not to know every meaning of the word.

Eve: Here is a web address with the basic idea of a reading circle outlined for the context of this discussion.

<http://www.sil.org/lingualinks/literacy/ReferenceMaterials/GlossaryOfLiteracyTerms/WhatIsAReadingCircle.htm>

Phanisara: Great site, Eve.

somporn nuddhapon: Wonderful

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): right, Phanisara But Mark Furr has some great format for EFL.

DUONG: Thank you for that. Now I have a project to launch, that is to ask students to read a book and make a report to the class

Damon Anderson: Duong, the report should be more than just retelling the story.

Phanisara: When we actually guided students along, we make students think along their reading process, make it more relevant, real, thus students will be able to understand better and longer.

somporn nuddhapon: What plays more important then...comprehension and important ??

Chollada: Thank you khun Nina and Eve I will read at that website.

William Wolf, ELF, Tra Vinh, Vietnam 2: Damon, you mentioned earlier in the chat the difficulty of getting students (perhaps especially Asian students) to express their own opinions about a text. One crucial way to help them, I feel, is to move from a classroom with a single focus (almost always the teacher) to a classroom that moves from single-focus to plural-focus. That's a fancy way to say "use small group discussions".

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): Duong, try Mark Furr with his approach of assigned tasks. Each student does something different in interpreting and processing the text.

somporn nuddhapon: ...Or it's something totally overlapped.

Eve: Here is Mark Furr's information <http://www.eflliteraturecircles.com/howandwhyilit.pdf>

Eve: Or at least some of it...

somporn nuddhapon: Thanks,Eve for the information.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): Thanks Eve For 'interior monologue,' a method I use, Linda Christensen of RETHINKING SCHOOLS (www.rethinkingschools.org) has pioneered this in critical English studies in American high schools. Her book Reading, writing and rising up. Teaching about social justice and the power of the written word. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2000 is a good source for this. Here an excerpt: tinyurl.com/4aqtmne

William Wolf, ELF, Tra Vinh, Vietnam 2: Chollada, you mentioned the problem of students not knowing enough vocabulary. I agree this is a real problem. It's essential to find texts that are easy enough (maybe 5 unknown words per page for self study, maybe 10-15 maxium for class study). If there are too many unknown words, there is no practical way for students to comprehend (much less undertand) the text.

Damon Anderson: William, I agree. That is when a teacher must decided to either adapt the material by simplifying it, or to scaffold it so the students can have a better chance of guessing the correct meanings of the words.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): William, the '5-finger rule' can apply: no more than about 5 new words on a page

Chollada: Mark Furr 's information is about the reading circle, it's very interesting

somporn nuddhapon: As a language teacher,should we foster our students to express their ideas. Education is not something yes/no answer I mean.Discussion brings us all intellectual.We need human capital.

Eve: I agree with using the small group structure with my students in Macao. We also have a team format that seems to really motivate them.

William Wolf, ELF, Tra Vinh, Vietnam 2: Bill, you made the iportant point that in a good reading circle it's important that students have tasks that are specific (and different, I'd add). A few years ago, I changed my methods to make sure that each student in a group of 3-5 readers had a different task, and this helped immensely. They were more interested in what each other had to say and also less likely to fail to do homework.

Jeff T. (Beijing): I tried a “movie circle”, similar to a reading circle. Students each worked to understand one aspect of a scene. Then they prepared an outline and discussed their findings with others in groups of 4-6. The preparation and discussion led to understanding of meaning or why a director used a certain technique. So I think reading circles would work for understanding in a similar way.

Phanisara: I agree with William. Comprehensibility of the language input will make a huge difference in motivating students to even read further.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): Chollada, you can do action research with reading circle and write an article.

Phanisara: Understanding, not just comprehending to memorize will increase students learning motivation.

Chollada: That is . William because if my students don't know the vocabularies more than 10 words in each paragraph ,they don't understand it. but I try to encourage them to read and guess the meaning of the sentences.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): KJrahen has been talking about 'comprehensible input' for long time I agree with him, esp. after teaching in Thailand working with ordinary non-privileged working-class learners

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): Krashen

William Wolf, ELF, Tra Vinh, Vietnam 2: Damon, one relatively easy way for teachers (with too many students and too little time) to scaffold a text is to write a short summary of it in simpler English. It is not a perfect method, but it is much better than giving students texts that are at the frustration level. A several-line summary of each page (in simple language) can help very much. Or asking 1-2 questions about each paragraph (with the questions focusing on the most important thing to understand) will also help.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): If students don't understand most of what they read or hear, they begin to feel defeated by English, the 'monster'

Chollada: And most of the examination is too long passage and the questions are so difficult for the students

Phanisara: Totally agree Bill. Success builds upon success. If students understand, they will read to increase their proficiency. They want to try; but sometime with too difficult text, they'll give up altogether.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): so that is basic ***comprehension**

William Wolf, ELF, Tra Vinh, Vietnam 2: I should add that all of this scaffolding should be written and given to students in the class prior to the discussion. Sometimes we teachers try to give the scaffolding in the class itself, but this doesn't give students enough time to process and understand.

somporn nuddhapon: What plays more important to our teaching profession is to make our students discover something and let them learn and later on they will understand things longlastingly.

Phanisara: Really like the word "explore" Aj. Somporn. Agree.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): I think along with simplifying, reducing to a kind of BASIC ENGLISH 850 (Jgden), students need to be asked questions where they talk about themselves using the vocab being focused on.

somporn nuddhapon: Should we have our students learn by themselves so that they can apply from what they have learned in the class to their lives practically.

Damon Anderson: Yes, Khun Somporn.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): I personally think Ogden's BASIC ENGLISH 850 is an important teaching tool. But hard to convince the profession of that.

Eve: To all of what was said, I think we also go back to the beginning of the chat with adding an element that they can personally relate to within the context of what we are teaching and how we are teaching it.

somporn nuddhapon: Yes, when students explore something by themselves they seem to apply everything they have to understand things clearly right.

Damon Anderson: That is true, Eve. The learning is more about the students than the text.

Eve: Exactly, somporn nuddhapon.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): whatever personal can mean, Eve. But a problem in much of East Asia is getting students to talk personally even in smaller groups. This is exposure of self that is a cultural barrier, right?

Damon Anderson: That is why I find my underlining activity is successful. They can read the text they marked, then respond to it. Somehow, this gives a short buffer before they launch into their feelings.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): How to deal with kreng jai in the classroom in Thailand can be perplexing.

Phanisara: Bill, I believe we still have hope. The cultural barrier can be overcome if new generation of teachers are more open-minded to let their students explore and allowed for free thinking and expression.

somporn nuddhapon: Anyway, teachers are the key persons to make our students learn...right? So should teachers design or prepare situations/experiences to well equip our students learning.

Damon Anderson: Everyone, this has been an interesting discussion so far. We have about 8 minutes left. What topic would you like to discuss next month?

Phanisara: Agree with Aj. Somporn. Especially in the Asian culture--Thais in particular---anything teachers allow---that's how it will be. We just need less of the authoritarian type of teachers and more of the democratic types.

somporn nuddhapon: Definitely true Khun Nina. As earliest mentioned...teachers seem to affect our students' growth a lot.

Chollada: Yes, that's right to give the opportunity to the students to study everything in English from Poems, Songs or etc.

Chollada: maybe we can make the new generation of English in Thai Culture

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): part of our task is to use or 'school' emotional intelligence as etachers of EFL literacy. that's why I emphasize social empathy

somporn nuddhapon: Once every voice is heard (from the class),we seem to respect our students'ideas automatically.

somporn nuddhapon: Again,what do you mean by social empathy,Bill.

Phanisara: Love the idea Aj. Chollada. New culture for Thai teachers...wow.. progressive thinking.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): I've found that students will write personally but hesitate to talk personally. So that assignments written or 'journals' help.

somporn nuddhapon: Yeah,I also like it...New Culture for Teachers.

Chollada: Yeah!! New generation in English style with Thai culture.

somporn nuddhapon: I like it.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): One mthod is getting students to respond 'anonymously' and distributing these unsigned responses in class. I have an article on that with one of my students who used this as lesson plan, will be published in the summer in HUMANISING LANGUAGE TEACHING

Phanisara: Very powerful title indeed Bill. "Humanising" EXACTLY.

somporn nuddhapon: Very interesting,how can i seem to have that book.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): Students like to protect their 'ego' and that has to be respected. Anyhow, have you tried 'anonymous' responses distributed in class to other students? Very interesting reactions, we have found in Kuala Lumpur.

Chollada: Humanising language , wow .. all the language

Damon Anderson: Any ideas out there for topics for our next chat?

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): The journal HUMANISING LANGUAGE TEACHING is online and all of us can publish there. It's not controlled by a bunch of academics.

Chollada: H OW to make the students brave in speaking English

somporn nuddhapon: What about leadership in English Education ??

Phanisara: This topic, by the way, was Damon idea. It has been a super topic of discussion. I like it. Thank you everyone.

Phanisara: Leadership is interesting. Who leads in the classrooms..... :) ?

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): how to deal with the typical large classes in Thailand (and Malaysia, I might add) is a good topic

Chollada: Oh!! large class ... I don't like it ,but I stay with it

Phanisara: Even the issue of dealing with large classes can be discussed under the topic of leadership. If students take the lead, large classes can be manageable and effective.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): assessment is another good topic In Thailand, students have to be failed. This is a big problem the schools do not deal with properly. But new forms of assessment, portfolio, and other?

Damon Anderson: Bill, we have participants from all over Southeast Asia, not just Thailand.

somporn nuddhapon: Leadership should be for a real seminar in Summer,would be better.What do you think ?

lê trần loan phượng: i prefer the topic "humanising" with the ego or self-centered.

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): large classes all over East Asia

Hari Menon: what about Proficiency tests vs Achievement Tests

Chollada: Big classes large studying

Phanisara: I like that Dr. Hari.

Damon Anderson: Well folks, we are out of time. Thank you so much for your participation today. Also thank you for your ideas for next month's topic.

somporn nuddhapon: Assessment seems important also to every country education development.

Hari Menon: considering the indicators from the curriculum and how teachers are using them as a measure

DUONG: Thank you very much for a very interesting and informative roundtable chat. I look forward to hearing from all of you again.

Phanisara: Thank you everyone. See you next month.

Damon Anderson: For those of you from Vietnam, when is Tet this year?

Bill Templer (Chang daeng): bye

somporn nuddhapon: How to teach large classes can also be another topic I think.

William Wolf, ELF, Tra Vinh, Vietnam 2: Feb 3 I think

Hari Menon: Bye Bye

DUONG: Feb 3

Damon Anderson: So we can have our next chat on Feb. 8.

William Wolf, ELF, Tra Vinh, Vietnam 2: But the holidays begin Jan 29 at my Uni, I was told.

Chollada: Thank you for having me , bye

William Wolf, ELF, Tra Vinh, Vietnam 2: Feb 8 or 9 was when I was told classes would start again.

DUONG: That's true, and we will begin work again on Feb 8

somporn nuddhapon: Thank you,Khun Nina,Mr.Damon and everyone.Bye see next month.
